

Developing Consensus for Refuge's Future

By Congressman Ron Kind

Many people are surprised to hear that the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge receives more annual visitors than Yellowstone National Park. That's right- the Upper Mississippi River, with 3.7 million annual visitors, is a more popular destination than "Old Faithful." Given its multiple uses, it really is no surprise that the Refuge is a favorite for outdoor and nature enthusiasts and draws so many people to the area every year.

As someone who has grown up near the Refuge and enjoyed the many wonders of the Mississippi River, I am proud to call myself a "river rat." I understand how important a healthy river system is, not only to our region's economy but also to our quality of life. As a boy, I would spend countless hours a day exploring the Mississippi or the vast stretch of Refuge territory. In the years since, I've had the great pleasure of raising two river rats of my own, taking them out as often as possible to enjoy everything from boating and swimming to hunting and fishing.

In an effort to ensure future generations are given the opportunity to enjoy all the benefits that the River and Refuge currently provide, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is in the process of developing a comprehensive conservation plan (CCP). The CCP is meant to establish new planning requirements for each of the nation's 545 refuges and clarify the standards and process used to regulate various recreational and commercial uses. Since the draft CCP's May 1, 2005, release, FWS has conducted 30 public meetings and met with countless individuals and organizations on the CCP.

Developing consensus has proven to be no easy task. Rightfully, individuals have different interests and ideas for the Refuge's future. Finding the right balance between these competing and conflicting interests is imperative to charting the best course. While opinions may differ in developing the CCP, none of us should lose sight of the Refuge's importance to our area's culture, economy, and quality of life.

Understanding this, I have worked continually in Congress to develop and implement public policies to restore and strengthen the river habitat, combat invasive species, promote land conservation, reduce sedimentation, and improve water quality. I have also made it a priority both in Washington and here in Wisconsin to strengthen and forge relations among people and organizations with an interest in and knowledge of the Upper Mississippi River Basin.

These efforts as well as the process of developing the CCP have a fundamental goal that I believe we all support – to maintain the ecological and environmental health of the Upper Mississippi and the Refuge so users and visitors may continue to enjoy the multiple benefits that the River and the Refuge provide. The public comment period and the series of meetings conducted by the FWS have provided an opportunity for people to share their ideas and opinions about how to best achieve this goal. This process has been invaluable not just for generating ideas and measuring public opinion, but also in reminding ourselves just how central a role the River and the Refuge play in all of our lives. There are still [two weeks] remaining in the CCP public comment period on preferred alternative E. Let your voice be heard before the deadline passes.

Comments on preferred alternative E are being received by FWS staff until March 6, 2006. To find out more about the process and submit comments directly to FWS, please visit www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/uppermiss or call 888-291-5719.